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BISHOP OF WOLLONGONG

MESSAGE TO THE PEOPLE OF THE DIOCESE OF WOLLONGONG REGARDING

Plenary Council 2020: *Listen to what the Spirit is saying*

My Sisters and Brothers in Christ

Many of you have heard that Plenary 2020 is coming. So what does that mean? *Plenary Council 2020* presents for us, as Catholics, the opportunity to ask a very simple question —What is the Holy Spirit asking us today? Many would quite rightly describe this time as one of upheaval and uncertainty. As people of faith, we trust even in the midst of such change that the Holy Spirit is powerfully at work moving and doing new things in the hearts and minds of the faithful.

Pentecost Sunday this year (20 May 2018) marked the official launch of *Plenary Council 2020*. Catholics throughout Australia—including many in our own Diocese of Wollongong—noted and proclaimed the apostolic blessing that the Australian Church received from Pope Francis and utilised the resources provided to ensure that this special day, of the coming of the Holy Spirit, provided a unique opportunity to call on the gifts of the Spirit during the plenary process. In many ways, it is an opportunity for us to listen deeply to our own hearts and the hearts of others in expressing what we love about who we are as the Church, as well as identifying and naming our shortcomings and disappointments, and expressing in concrete ways our hopes for the future. I am confident this process will lead us to discern the *sensus fidelium* (sense of faith) of all our communities who listen humbly and speak boldly on the matters important to the Church in Australia at this time.

Whilst many people in our Diocese are very eager to take up the opportunity to contribute to *Plenary Council 2020*, there are still many others who remain unaware that the Australian Church is now in "plenary" mode and the process of praying, listening, talking, discerning and contributing thoughts in a considered way has already commenced. Therefore, the purpose of this communication is to ensure that you are made aware of the significance of the plenary council and to provide you with initial details of how we, as the Church in the Diocese of Wollongong, can participate and contribute wisely, sensitively and authentically to *Plenary Council 2020*.

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It is my hope that many parishes will have already utilised the resources forwarded to you that have been developed by the national Plenary Council Executive Committee, especially the resources associated with the launch on Pentecost Sunday. If not, that is easily overcome, as the resources remain a pertinent way to enable local communities to prayerfully focus on what the Spirit is saying.

Pope Francis in his message to the Australian Church on the inauguration of *Plenary Council 2020* expressed: "It is my hope that through patient dialogue and faith-filled discernment, the conciliar journey will confirm the Catholics in Australia in a spirit of fraternal unity and missionary discipleship, thus enabling them to be a leaven of holiness, justice and reconciliation in today's rapidly changing society". (Pope Francis, *Apostolic Blessing,* May 2018)

Plenary Council 2020 will be only the fifth plenary council in Australia's history, the first since 1937, and the first to feature women and lay people. Described as a three-year journey of listening to God by listening to one another, *Plenary Council 2020* will be the highest possible formal gathering of the Church in Australia and,

unlike a synod, it has the power to make changes to its legislation and governance in Australia. Cultural reform of the Church is likely to feature prominently.

Archbishop Timothy Costelloe of Perth—endorsed by Pope Francis as the president of *Plenary Council 2020*—hopes that the plenary council will bring about a period of authentic renewal:

> "I encourage all Catholics, whether devout or disillusioned, fervent or frustrated, to seize this opportunity to speak what is on their minds and in their hearts."

As individuals, parish communities and regions in the Diocese of Wollongong, there are some simple things you can, and should, be doing in this initial phase of prayer and listening. One of the best places to start is the *Plenary Council 2020* website, **www.plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au,** which provides great resources that will assist us as the Church to pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to understand the purpose and processes of the plenary council, to provide forums for discussion and feedback, and to provide updates as we journey toward the plenary council gatherings in 2020 and 2021.

For us in the Diocese, the remainder of 2018 and early 2019 will be a period for initial *listening* followed by a period of *discerning* and *feedback* in 2019, ready for a year of *proposing* in 2020 as we move to *attending* and *contributing* to the plenary council meetings. In 2021, after the plenary council meetings, the Church in Australia will commence *implementing* changes arising from the council.

Much has already happened behind the scenes in the Diocese to prepare in earnest for our participation in *Plenary Council 2020*. Our recent *Journey* magazine provided a summative introduction on the plenary council. Clergy have been briefed at their recent mid-year clergy conference in detail about the plenary council. Numerous key diocesan leaders from the Office of the Bishop have already attended information sessions and have been briefed on how to assist parishes and communities to utilise the resources and ensure an authentic process of listening. Appropriate resources are being allocated to ensure our ear is attuned constantly to the Holy Spirit and that opportunities are provided for listening, collating and communicating the thoughts of many.

We will launch our diocesan process at a Vigil Mass at St John Vianney Co-Cathedral in Fairy Meadow at 6pm on Saturday 18 August 2018. The Vigil will also include a commissioning of Local Animators nominated by faith communities and the distribution of plenary kits including *Plenary Council 2020* candles, books for recording plenary reflections, and various other items to assist in the process of listening to and recording dialogue at a local level.

I have included in this correspondence a supporting document to explain the important role Local Animators will play in this process in the Diocese of Wollongong in Parishes, Schools and CatholicCare and other faith communities. Further, this document provides information to assist these communities in the discernment and selection process of one individual in your community setting who might serve in the role of communicating *Plenary Council 2020*—enabling respectful listening and promoting various types of submissions and appropriate recording of feedback. (Details of options for training processes for Local Animators are detailed in this document)

Coinciding with your own small group listening processes in your parish, we are holding four regional listening sessions. These will be held on Sunday afternoons from 12pm–4pm, enabling us to enter into a process of deep listening and discernment. More concrete details will be made in due course, but, I would ask that you note the following regional dates in order to be able to attend:

- **11 November 2018—Illawarra**
- **18 November 2018—Southern Highlands**
- **17 February 2019—Shoalhaven**
- **24 February 2019—Macarthur**

Plenary Council 2020 is a cause for great excitement and one that we must enter into full of trust in God's guiding hand. We have much to plan and organise along this journey, and that will happen in an ongoing way in the weeks and months ahead. It is important to note though: no matter how well we plan, this process will be "messy" at times, and necessarily so, because it deals with both the human and the divine. It will thus require patience and humility if we are to be led by the Spirit in honest and respectful dialogue. It requires us to sincerely pray with, and for, each other as we open ourselves to this process of expressing our loves, disappointments, hurts and hopes for who we are as Church. Together, let's see what the Holy Spirit is saying to us.

Yours in Christ

+Brian Mascord

Most Rev Brian G Mascord DD
Bishop of Wollongong

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